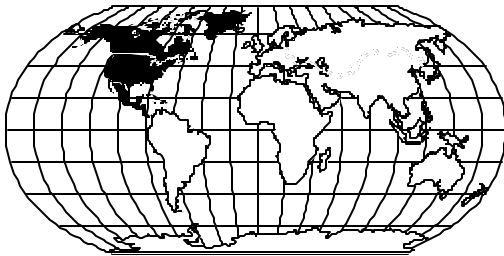


LESSON 2: NORTH AMERICA — FROM TUNDRA TO TROPICS



Catholic
collective
commonwealth
cordillera
dominion
fragmented state
isthmus
plural state
postindustrial
Protestant
semiautonomous

INTRODUCTION



North America (Illustration 5.2.1) is the third largest continent comprising all the land and adjacent islands north of and including the **Isthmus** of Panama. A principal physical feature of North America is the North American **Cordillera**, a mountain region in the west that extends from Alaska to Mexico and includes the Rocky Mountains. Other important physical features are the Appalachian Mountains, the Great Lakes, the Great Plains, and the Mississippi River which, along with the Missouri and Ohio Rivers, makes up one of the world's longest river systems.

The Bering Strait separates Asia in the Eastern Hemisphere from North America in the Western. Many scholars believe that between 7,000 and 20,000 years ago the Bering Strait was a land bridge that allowed people from

Asia to migrate to and populate North and South America. These people are the ancestors of today's Native Americans — North American Indians and Eskimos of Greenland, Canada, and the U.S., and Middle American Indians of Middle America. In addition to Native American culture, European and African influences shaped North America as Europeans colonized the continent and brought slave labor from Africa. Over centuries, these cultures combined in a variety of ways to create the human landscape of today's North America.

GREENLAND: THE FROZEN ISLAND

Greenland (Illustration 5.2.1) is the world's second largest island — the largest being Australia. Lying mostly within the Arctic Circle, an ice sheet, which is more than two miles thick in some places, covers over four-fifths of Greenland. Most of the population, however, lives on the island's warmer southwest coast, which is not within the Arctic Circle. A former Danish colony, Greenland is now a **semiautonomous** state of Denmark. About 90 percent of its people are of mixed Eskimo and Danish ancestry.

CANADA: A PLURAL STATE

Canada (Illustration 5.2.2), a self-governing **dominion** within the British **Commonwealth** of Nations, is the second largest country in the world (only Russia is larger). It consists of ten provinces and three territories. Starting in the east are the Atlantic Provinces (Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and New Brunswick). Moving west, the provinces of Quebec and then Ontario are next. Moving farther west are the Prairie Provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta. The westernmost province is British Columbia. In the north are the territories known as the Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut (created from the eastern half of the Northwest Territories in April 1999).



Illustration 5.2.1

The capital of Canada is Ottawa, located in southeast Ontario. The largest and most populous cities are Montreal, located in Quebec on the Saint Lawrence River, and Toronto, located in Ontario on Lake Ontario. The Great Lakes along with the Saint Lawrence River form a major shipping artery navigable by ocean-going vessels.

The Canadian Shield stretches from the Saint Lawrence River and the Great Lakes northwest to the Arctic Ocean. Formerly referred to as a plateau, it is a region of ancient rock and many lakes formed by the advance and retreat of ice sheets. Centered on the Hudson Bay, the shield covers over half of Canada. The area is rich in minerals and water power.

Southeast of the Canadian Shield in the Atlantic Provinces is the northern section of the

DID YOU KNOW?

The greatest drop between Great Lakes occurs between Lakes Erie and Ontario, falling 167 feet at Niagara Falls.

Appalachian Mountains which extend down into the southeastern U.S. West of the shield in southwest Manitoba as well as most of Saskatchewan and Alberta are wheat-growing, oil-rich plains or prairies. This area includes the northern reaches of the Great Plains, a semi-arid grassland that extends south into Texas. Along the western border of Alberta and in British Columbia and the Yukon is the North American Cordillera. The cordillera in Canada includes the Rocky Mountains, known as the Canadian Rockies, and the Coast Mountains.

PEOPLE

Most Canadians possess high living standards and live in an urbanized, **postindustrial** society. The majority of the population is of European descent (approximately 48 percent of British origin and 31 percent of French origin) and of Christian faith (approximately 46 percent are Roman **Catholic** and 45 percent are **Protestant**). In Ontario and the territories are large Indian minorities, and there is a rapidly growing Asian population in the west. Although Canada is a huge country, its population is small — only one-tenth that of the U.S. Moreover, most Canadians live within 100 miles of the U.S. border.

Unlike the U.S., Canada has two official languages. English is the home language to about 62 percent of the population, and French is the home language to 26 percent. Most French-speaking Canadians live in Quebec, where 80 percent of the people are of French origin. Montreal, Quebec, is second only to Paris, France, as the largest French-speaking city in the world.

French-Canadians hold strongly to French history, tradition, and culture, while most other Canadians prefer British customs. This separation of French and British language and culture has inhibited the formation of a single combined culture in Canada and makes Canada a **plural state**.

ECONOMY

Canada's wealth of natural resources makes it a prosperous nation. Forests covering 46 percent of the country support wood-processing industries. Minerals found in the Canadian Shield make Canada one of the world's leading mineral exporters. Coal, oil,

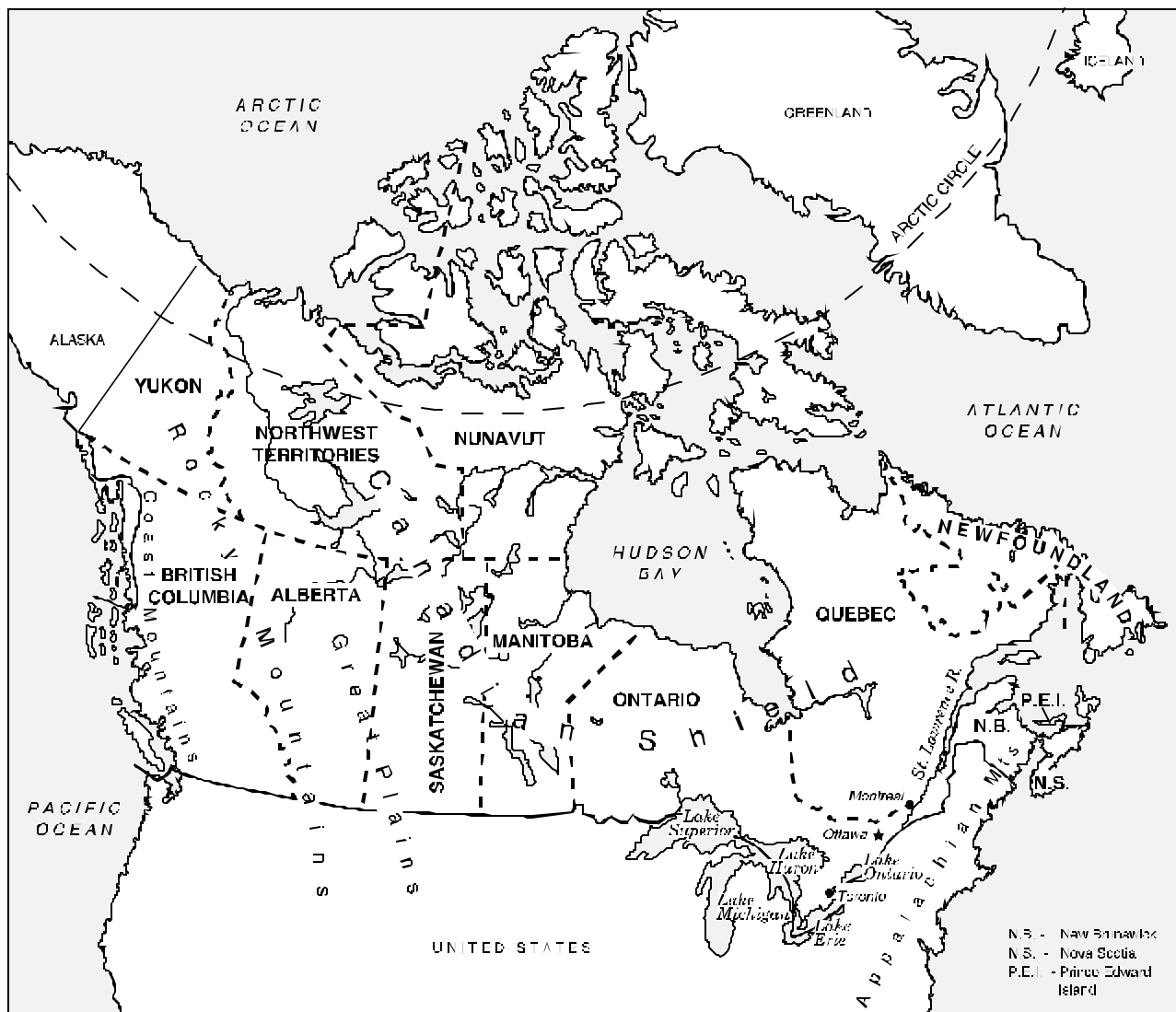


Illustration 5.2.2

and natural gas are abundant in the Prairie Provinces, and agriculture in these provinces produces major exports of grains and meat. The Atlantic Provinces and British Columbia provide most of Canada's fishing catch, and the area's natural beauty attracts many tourists.

Manufacturing is a chief economic activity in Quebec and Ontario. The Great Lakes and Saint Lawrence River form a chief trading artery, with Montreal and Toronto as principal ports. Toronto is also English-

speaking Canada's leading financial and communications center. The U.S. is Canada's leading trade partner and an important financial investor.

THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA: FROM SEA TO SHINING SEA

The United States of America (Illustration 5.2.3), the fourth largest country in the world, includes 50 states and one federal district, the District of Columbia. Canada and the Pacific Ocean separate

Alaska and Hawaii, respectively, from the other 48 states, making the U.S. a **fragmented state**. The U.S. also holds territories in the Caribbean Sea and Pacific Ocean. Because of their geographic locations, these territories and Hawaii, will be discussed later in the sections about Middle America and Oceania.

Like Canada, significant terrain features of the U.S. include the Great Lakes, Great Plains, Appalachians, and the North American Cordillera. The Appalachians run 1,600 miles from eastern Canada to Alabama. East and south of the Appalachians is the Gulf-Atlantic Coastal Plain, characterized by flat, low-lying coastlines in contrast to the mountainous coastlines along the Pacific. Stretching west of the Appalachians are the Interior Plains, fertile lowlands that were once covered by an inland sea. Even farther west are the Great Plains, a treeless plateau area that gradually rises to the foothills of the Rockies.

As mentioned previously, the Rocky Mountains, or Rockies, are part of the North American Cordillera and extend from New Mexico north through the U.S. (Southern, Central, and Northern Rockies) into Canada (Canadian Rockies) and Alaska (Brooks Range). The Cordillera also includes the Alaska Range along the south coast of Alaska, home to Mount McKinley, the highest point in North America. Farther west of the Rockies in the continental U.S., the Cordillera includes the Cascade Range with volcanic peaks like Mount Rainier; the Sierra Nevada; and the Coast Ranges.

Between the Rockies and these western ranges is the Intermontane Region. This region consists of plateaus, basins, and lower ranges. There are also several deserts in this area, one of which is Death Valley in Southern California and Southern Nevada.

Rivers like the Columbia and Colorado have cut deep gorges through the Intermontane Region. One such gorge cut by the Colorado River in Arizona is the Grand Canyon, which is up to 1 mile deep, 4 to 18 miles wide, and more than 200 miles long.

The Continental Divide, which follows the crest of the Rocky Mountains, separates the rivers that drain into the Pacific Ocean from those that drain into the Atlantic. The Columbia and Colorado Rivers flow west from the Rockies supplying power, irrigation, and water to western states. On the other side of the Rockies, the Missouri River flows east then south to meet the Mississippi River near St. Louis, Missouri. Farther south at Cairo, Illinois, the Ohio River meets the Mississippi. These three rivers make up the Mississippi River System, which drains the mid-western U.S. and is the chief river system of North America.

PEOPLE

People of the U.S. have been shaped by the wide variety of immigrant groups who have made the U.S. their home over the past two centuries. Many of the original European settlers came to the “New World” to build better lives based on freedom and equality. Their beliefs became the basis of American social and political life.

Unlike Canadians, people of European descent in the U.S. mixed to form a **collective** group, and immigrants to the U.S. continue to become a part of mainstream American society — thus, the U.S. nickname “the melting pot.” In some cases, however, this mixing does not occur. Consequently, immigrants and their descendants find themselves, willingly or not, in ethnic communities inhabited by racial minorities.

Like their Canadian neighbors, Americans enjoy a high standard of living. Both countries are rich in natural resources that contribute to a productive economy. Many Americans relocate as economic opportunities shift from place to place. In fact, Americans are the most mobile people in the world, with 19 percent of the population changing residence each year.

REGIONS

The continental U.S. is often divided into the following regions (Illustration 5.2.4) based on physical landscapes, dominant cultures, and/or major economic activities.

New England is famous for its natural harbors, colorful autumns, picturesque villages, and historic sites dating from colonial times. Tourism, recreation, fishing, forestry, and farming in the region's fertile valleys are important economic activities. Manufacturing is a leading source of income in southern New England states, making them part of the Manufacturing Belt as well.

The Manufacturing Belt was the country's economic leader between the Civil War (1861 – 1865) and the decline of the industrial age in the 1970s. Since then, America's economy has turned from traditional manufacturing to high-tech industries. Although manufacturing remains important, fast-growing areas in the west and south provide competition for the Manufacturing Belt. Nevertheless, some cities such as Boston, New York City, and Washington, D.C. are booming in this high-tech age.

The Agricultural Heartland has vast areas of fertile land for crop growth and dairy and livestock production. Iowa and Illinois are the center of the Corn Belt. West of the Corn Belt in the Great Plains is the Wheat Belt. Even the economies of large cities in the

region, like Kansas City, Minneapolis, and Denver, are based on agriculture operating major processing centers for grains and livestock.

The South remained isolated economically and culturally from the rest of the country following the Civil War. Then, in the 1960s, interest in the South resurfaced, and it became the United States' most rapidly changing region. With its warm climate and fertile soils, agricultural areas began to produce high-value products like beef, poultry, and soybeans. At the same time, tourists began flocking to the region's coastal beaches. Atlanta, Houston, Miami, Tampa, and New Orleans grew into booming cities practically overnight, and high-tech industries continue to move into the region today.

The Southwest is an area of vast, open space, characterized by long, hot summers. The eastern portion of the region contains abundant supplies of oil and natural gas that provide much of its economic wealth. This region also successfully represents the postindustrial revolution with electronic and space-technology facilities located between Houston (on the dividing line between the South and Southwest regions), San Antonio, and Dallas-Fort Worth.

The Interior Periphery includes Alaska and the area stretching from the Sierra Nevada-Cascade Range to the Rocky Mountains. The region is isolated, rugged, and sparsely populated. Despite its disadvantages, the Interior Periphery is one of the Earth's major storehouses of mineral and energy resources. During the oil shortage of the 1970s, oil companies explored Alaska, Wyoming, and Colorado in search of petroleum and natural gas. Minerals mined in the region include coal, uranium, copper, lead, zinc, platinum, gold, silver, and nickel.

The West Coast covers the area on the Pacific coast between the Sierra Nevada-Cascade Range and the Pacific Ocean. This region, despite being earthquake prone, has a hospitable environment with year-round agreeable weather south of San Francisco.

Major development of the region took place after World War II (1939 – 1945), much of it in California, an innovator of national culture and industry and the most populated state. In Oregon and Washington, long-standing economic activities like logging and fishing still thrive. Industrialization also exists in the form of aluminum and aircraft manufacturing.

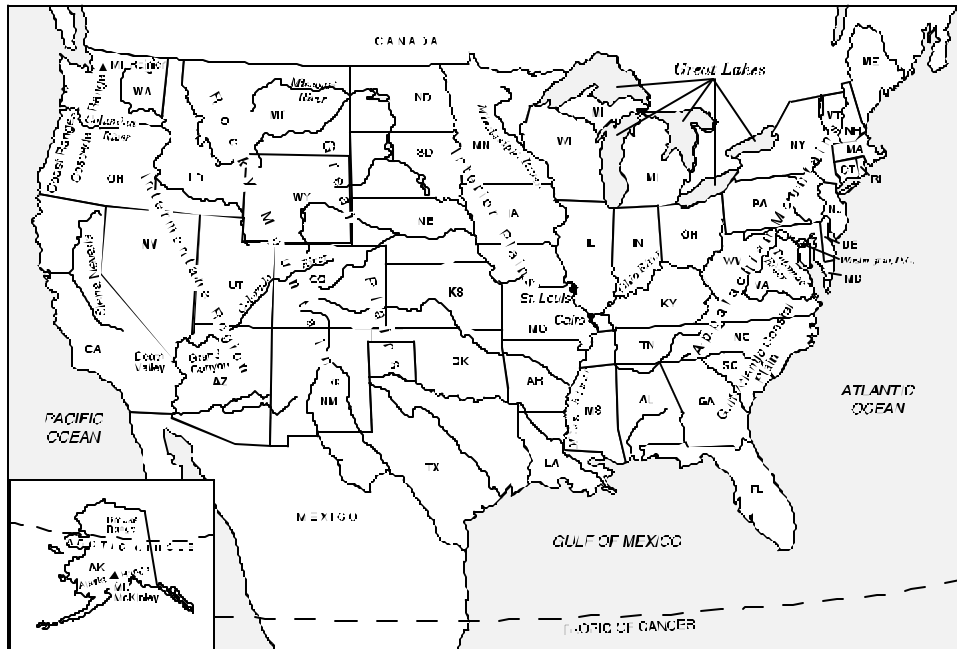


Illustration 5.2.3 — The United States

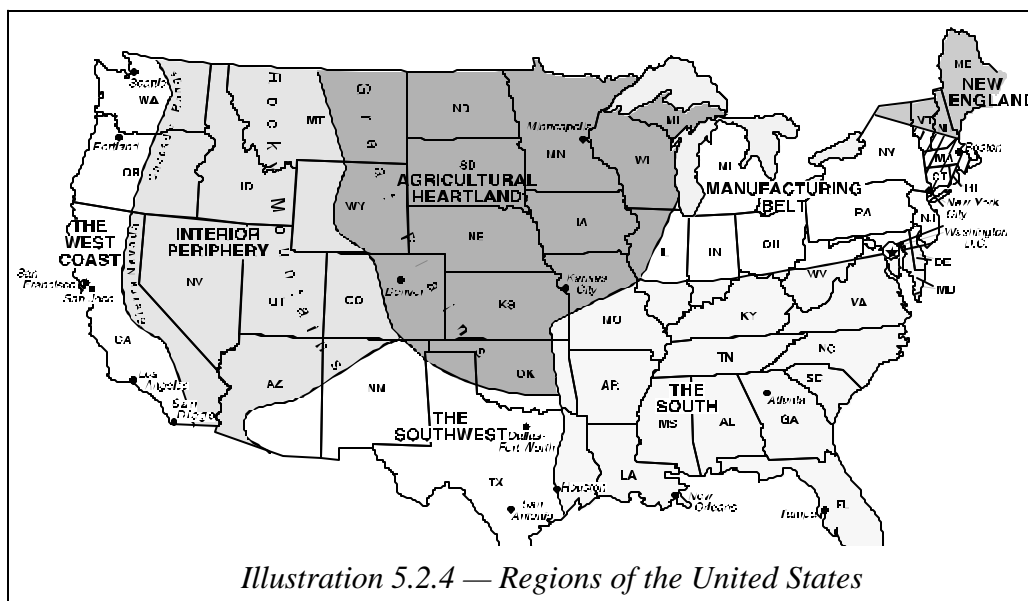


Illustration 5.2.4 — Regions of the United States

Illustration F. Regions of the United States

A great advantage to this region in the current global economy is its proximity to Asia.

MIDDLE AMERICA: SEPARATING ATLANTIC AND PACIFIC

Middle America (Illustration 5.2.1) constitutes all the land and islands south of the U.S. and north of the South American continent. It is a crucial barrier between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and a bridge from North America to South America. Middle America consists of:

- Mexico, a large country that dominates Middle America in size, population, and economic wealth
- Central America, consisting of seven countries: Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama
- The West Indies, which separate into the Bahamas, the Greater Antilles that include the larger islands (Cuba, Hispaniola, Jamaica, and Puerto Rico), and the Lesser Antilles that include all other islands.

A major geographic feature of Middle America is the Sierra Madre Mountain System, which is the southernmost part of the North American Cordillera. This area forms the junction of the North American Cordillera and the outlying reaches of the Andes, a similar cordillera in South America. The area also marks the collision of several tectonic plates. Because of this, Middle America is mostly mountainous, with active volcanoes and earthquakes.

Unfortunately, Middle America is the least developed region in the Americas, and many Middle American people live in poverty. Much of the area is also politically unstable. These two factors drive many

Middle Americans to cross the border into the U.S. looking for a better existence.

MEXICO: MERGING CULTURES

Mexico (Illustration 5.2.1) consists of 31 states and the Federal District of Mexico City, its capital. Mexico's significant geographic features include the Baja California Peninsula in the northwest, an extension of California's Coast Ranges; the Gulf of California that separates the Baja California Peninsula from the rest of Mexico. Also noteworthy is the Rio Grande River which separates Texas from Mexico. The Yucatán Peninsula in the southeast and the Sierra Madre Mountain System comprise two other major features of Mexico.

Sierra Madre Del Sur in the south splits as it nears Mexico City, dividing into Sierra Madre Occidental in the west and Sierra Madre Oriental in the east. These mountains frame Mexico's central plateau, which is 8,000 feet in elevation in the south near Mexico City and declines to 3,600 feet at the Rio Grande. The plateau is desert in the north, contains shallow lakes and swamps in the center, and has tropical forests in the south. Generally, Mexico has a dry climate with only 12 percent of the country receiving adequate rainfall.

Important Historical/Political Considerations

Mexico was the birthplace of several great Indian civilizations, including the Maya and Aztec. In the 1500s, Spanish conquistadors conquered the Indians and made Mexico a Spanish colony. Indians became laborers for the Spanish, and a mestizo class (of mixed Spanish and Indian blood) developed. Colonists gained independence from Spanish rule in 1821, and Mexico became a federal republic in 1823.

People

Mexico's population has grown rapidly in the twentieth century more than tripling from 1940 to 1980. In 1991, it was 19 million, more than the combined populations of all the other Middle American countries and islands. Only one-third of the population lives in rural areas; 68 percent reside in towns and cities. Over one-half of the people in Mexico live in a zone that centers on Mexico City and extends from Veracruz in the east to Guadalajara in the west.

Sixty percent of Mexicans are mestizo, 29 percent are Indian, and 9 percent are European. Ninety-five percent are Roman Catholic. Spanish is the official language of Mexico. Five million Mexicans also speaking an Indian language and 1 million speaking an Indian language only. In addition to language, Mexican culture has been influenced by Indian dress, food, art, and architecture. In fact, Mexican culture is truly a mixture of both European and Indian cultural traits.

Economy

For almost 100 years after Mexican independence, most of the farmable land belonged to wealthy Spanish landowners who left much of the land uncultivated. Consequently, the country did not produce enough to feed its citizens. In 1910, a revolution to redistribute land began. The Constitution of 1917 made redistribution the law. Today, the government has redistributed over half of the cultivable land to mostly peasant communities. Although these communities tend to use outdated farming methods to grow Mexican staples (corn, beans, and squash) for their own consumption, commercial agriculture uses modern irrigation and farming techniques to produce high-value crops and livestock, like cotton, wheat, and cattle.

Since World War II, Mexico has enjoyed considerable economic growth. The country's mineral resources include silver, copper, zinc, and lead. Mexico is a leading producer of oil and natural gas. Manufacturing is also a source of economic wealth, especially in Mexico City and the border cities of Ciudad Juárez/El Paso and Tijuana/San Diego.

Although the discovery of oil and natural gas brought Mexico great prosperity, the country borrowed heavily in the 1970s as oil prices soared. When oil prices fell it was saddled with a huge foreign debt it could not pay off. Today, Mexico continues to strive for improvements in industry and agriculture as it struggles with its huge national debt and a skyrocketing population growth rate.

CENTRAL AMERICA: A LAND OF UNREST

Central America (Illustration 5.2.1) occupies the narrow strip of land in the southernmost part of North America between Mexico and South America. The narrowest point in Central America spans 40 miles from the Pacific to the Caribbean and lies in Panama. The Panama Canal, constructed by the U.S. from 1904 to 1914, is a 51-mile long waterway cut across central Panama connecting the Atlantic Ocean, by way of the Caribbean Sea, to the Pacific Ocean. Instead of sailing around South America to get from the Atlantic to the Pacific (which can take about two weeks), ships can make the trip in seven to eight hours by way of the canal.

The interior of Central America is mostly mountainous, with low-lying coastal plains on both the Pacific and Caribbean sides. The area has an active zone of

volcanoes and earthquakes. The highlands and the Pacific side of Central America are more hospitable to human habitation than the Caribbean side which tends to have hotter, wetter weather. Much of the area receives adequate rainfall, with heavy rainfall in the east. Where rainfall exceeds 100 inches and humankind has left nature untouched, tropical rain forests thrive in Central America.

Important Historical/Political Considerations

Much of Central America's history parallels Mexico's history. Spanish explorers conquered the area along with Mexico. With the exception of Belize (formerly under British rule), Spain ruled Central America until the colonies declared independence — most in the early 1800s.

Since their independence, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua have had a history of repressive governments, military rule, armed rebellions, terrorism, and civil war. Their proximity to Honduras, a democratic republic, has also caused that more stable country to suffer. As in Mexico, problems have occurred over the huge gap between wealthy landowners and the poor, and conflicts also exist between various Indian and mestizo groups.

In contrast to this political instability, Costa Rica, which has an old democratic tradition, has remained politically stable for most of the past 175 years. Panama, also a democracy, is buffered from the rest of Central America's strife by Costa Rica. Belize, Central America's only monarchy, is fairly stable as well.

People

In general, the majority of Central Americans are mestizo with Indian and white minorities. Exceptions include Guatemala

where almost half of the population is pure Indian; Belize where half of the population is black or mulatto (of mixed black and white ancestry); and Costa Rica where there is a large majority of Spanish and relatively recent European immigrants.

Like Mexicans, the majority of Central Americans are Spanish-speaking Catholics; some speak Indian languages as well. Because of its British heritage, Belize is an exception: English is the official language and 35 percent of its population is Protestant. Many Panamanians also speak English, since Panama has had significant contact with the U.S. due to U.S. interest in the Panama Canal.

Many people in Central America become refugees, leaving their countries because of political and economic instability. Honduras is the poorest, least developed country in Central America, while Costa Ricans have the highest standard of living and a literacy rate and life expectancy more like that in the U.S.

Economy

Agricultural exports like bananas, coffee, and sugarcane, are the mainstay of Central America's economy. Unfortunately, political instability and feuds over the redistribution of farmland have hurt agriculture in many countries and discouraged foreign investment and tourism. The Caribbean-like Belize and stable Costa Rica, however, attract many tourists. Costa Rica also produces beef for export, and Panama earns much of its income from shipping through the use of the Panama Canal.

THE WEST INDIES: ISLAND PARADISE

The West Indies (Illustration 5.2.1) is an archipelago (a group of islands) that extends in an arc from Florida in North

America to Venezuela in South America. This arc separates the Caribbean Sea from the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean. Many of the islands are the tops of mountains rising from the floor of the sea. The islands divide into three main groups: the Bahamas, the Greater Antilles, and the Lesser Antilles.

The Bahamas consist of about 700 islands and 2,400 reefs. Because most of the islands are low, flat, and riverless, so people inhabit only about 20 of them. They begin 50 miles off the southeast coast of Florida and extend for 600 miles southeast into the Atlantic Ocean, ending near the island of Hispaniola. Hispaniola, divided into Haiti and the Dominican Republic, is part of the Greater Antilles along with Cuba, Jamaica, and Puerto Rico. These four islands located in the Caribbean Sea are the largest in the West Indies. The remaining smaller islands are known as the Lesser Antilles.

Important Historical/Political Considerations

In 1492, Columbus discovered the Bahamas, and European colonization of the entire Caribbean area quickly followed. Sugar plantations prospered at the expense of the Caribbean Indians, the original inhabitants, who perished in slavery. African slaves replaced them. Countries disputed over rights to many of the islands, and some islands passed from colonial power to colonial power. Today, most of the islands have gained independence.

The U.S. acquired Puerto Rico from Spain after the Spanish-American War (1898). In 1917, Puerto Ricans attained U.S. citizenship, and in 1952, the country became a self-governing territory of the United States. The U.S. purchased the 52 western Virgin Islands from Denmark in 1917, and the people of these islands became U.S. citizens

in 1927. The 36 eastern Virgin Islands belong to England.

People

The West Indies is one of the most densely populated parts of North America. There are currently 34 million people living in the West Indies, almost 11 million of them in Cuba. Unlike the rest of Middle America, the original Indians of the Caribbean did not survive European colonization. Forced into plantation labor, they died by the thousands. The few hundred remaining Indians mixed with African slaves brought to replace them, and the pure Caribbean Indian disappeared.

With the exceptions of Cuba and Puerto Rico where the majority of people are of Spanish descent, people of African descent make up the majority in the West Indies. African heritage is visible in village construction, local markets, food, and art.

Because of the islands' history of European colonization, European influences also exist. For example, British influence survives in the Bahamas, Jamaica, and Grenada; Spanish influence can be seen in Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico. French influence is evident in Haiti, Guadeloupe, and Martinique. Dutch customs are readily observed in the Netherlands Antilles. Likewise, languages spoken in the islands include English, Spanish, French, and Dutch. Because of this diversity, the people of the West Indies practice many religions, with Roman Catholicism the most predominant. In Cuba, which is a communist country, religious practice is discouraged.

Economy

The warm climate of the West Indies, the clear Caribbean waters, and the beautiful

beaches support a large tourist industry, particularly cruise ships. Yet, with the exceptions of Puerto Rico and Cuba, poverty is the rule in this area. Haiti is the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere, and the slums in its capital, Port-au-Prince, are among

the worst in the world. Agriculture (sugar, coffee, bananas, among other crops) is the main economic activity in the West Indies. Since the best land grows crops for export, rather than for local consumption, many local people are undernourished.
